Mughal Gardens: History, Geography and Culture

Nishat Bagh garden on Dal Lake, Kashmir.

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Few cultures have as strong a connection among gardens, territory and identity as the Mughal Empire of South and Central Asia in the late fifteenth to the mid nineteenth century. It is interesting to reflect on how Mughal gardens continue to be a defining part of that heritage in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The emphasis on gardens in the Memoirs of the first Mughal ruler, Babur (1483–1530), established a strong foundation |1|. *The Baburnama* recalled the garden legacy inherited from Timur (1336–1405) in Samarkand and Babur's descendants in Herat whom he consciously emulated in Kabul. Grand surviving sites, beginning with Humayun's Tomb-Garden in Delhi, built upon that foundation in enduring ways. The *hasht bihisht* (eight paradises) layout of Humayun's Tomb-Garden was spatially intertwined with the shrine of the fourteenth-century Sufi saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya (1253–1325). Nizamuddin's close disciple, Amir Khusrau, also buried here, composed a famous *Hasht Bihisht* poem (*The Eight Paradises*).[1] The significance of gardens in Mughal culture continued to resonate with garden enthusiasts in India and elsewhere long after the Mughal Empire was defeated by the British, inspiring contemporary garden design as well as conservation efforts. All of these factors, along with a modest body of scholarship, help explain the continuing salience of Mughal garden heritage in modern cultures.[2]

The Historic Cities Programme (HCP) projects in this volume present the state of the art in garden and urban heritage conservation. They also prompt new research questions about the history, geography and culture of Mughal gardens. How exactly were these gardens sited, laid out and designed? How did they relate to larger territorial projects and processes? How were they experienced by different social groups? It is challenging to return to the historical sources with these questions in mind. Not all Mughal garden events bespoke beauty, grandeur or virtue.

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|1| Babur's Tomb-Garden, known as Bagh-e Babur, in Kabul, Afghanistan.
|2| Babur's Lotus Garden at Dholpur, India.

Some were associated with conquest and refuge in Mughal as well as modern terms.[3] However, most Mughal garden history remains unknown, literally buried under metres of silt, as was the Moonlight Garden (Mahtab Bagh) in Agra until it was excavated in the 1990s; or lying unexamined in collections of manuscripts, paintings and poetry. While all of the arts change over time, gardens are especially dynamic, over the seasons of the year and the lifespans of plantings, disappearing rapidly in the absence of care. At present, one can only scratch the surface of these dynamic processes when surveying the history of Mughal gardens.

Origins and Antecedents

The earliest reference to gardens in Mughal history occurs in the first pages of *The Baburnama*, which offer a sumptuous geographic description of Fergana province in what is now Uzbekistan. "The Andizhan River passes through the area around Osh and goes on to Andizhan. On both its banks are gardens, all of which overlook the river. The violets are beautiful, there is running water, and in the spring when many tulips and roses blossom, it is quite nice."[4] This memory of a childhood landscape would be replicated in Babur's garden designs in Kabul and India, culminating in Agra. *The Baburnama's* first reference to a historic garden event occurred in a tenuous context: "When the accident happened to Umar-Shaykh Mirza [his father], I was in the *chahar-bagh* of Andhizan".[5] His father's death triggered a precarious succession that led Babur on his path towards Samarkand and beyond.

The origins of Mughal garden culture began much earlier. The immediate historical precedents came from Babur's famous ancestor Timur (1336–1405). References to gardens in Timurid histories are usually metaphorical or poetic, but a near-contemporary biography by Sharafuddin Ali Yazdi, known as the *Zafar-nama*, recorded Timur's orders to construct a massive square Dilkusha Bagh garden with symmetrical paths, tile-covered corner dovecotes and a central building. This garden was built outside Samarkand in honour of a new wife in 1396, and it was followed by charitable philanthropy at a shrine and a spontaneous garden project called the 'Takht-i Qaracha', which was "... laid out there in such a way that the sweet waters of the river would flow through the garden in remembrance of the divine words 'beneath which rivers flow'".[6] This recurring phrase in the Qur'an underscores that the original garden was that of the creation and the final one would be that of paradise. European travellers amplified the description of Timur's gardens in this world.

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Babur tried to emulate Timur's garden model during his brief capture of Samarkand, but he failed to sustain it, fleeing and taking refuge in gardens before settling in Kabul. Another set of Timurid relatives in the city of Herat created a garden culture that Babur enjoyed but did not fully respect. They inspired him to combine garden construction with territorial expansion – linking gardens and geography – first in the Kabul region and then eastward in the territory known as Hindustan. At least two of Babur's small gardens survive, one known as the Takht-i Baburi (throne of Babur) in the Salt Range of Punjab, Pakistan, and another called the Lotus Garden (Bagh-i Nilufar) at the village of Dholpur in northern India |2|.[7]

Unlike Timur's sack of Delhi in 1398 after which he returned to Samarkand, Babur chose to relocate his capital to Agra after defeating the Lodi dynasty in 1526. This decision faced opposition from local people and his own nobles who were unused to the heat and plains. In response, Babur and other nobles "...built geometric and beautifully planned gardens and ponds [...] they made running water with waterwheels [...] Since the people of India had never seen such planned or regular spaces they nicknamed the side of the Jumna on which these structures stood 'Kabul'."[8] Over the course of the next two centuries, Mughal riverfront gardens extended along both sides of the Yamuna River at Agra, which foreign travellers compared with Paris and London.[9]

This burst of garden building at the end of Babur's short life in India cycled back to his early gardens at Kabul, and to even earlier childhood memories of Fergana and the inherited legacy

|3| Fatehpur Sikri, Uttar Pradesh, India.

|4| The central axis of Humayun's Tomb complex, Delhi, India.

from Samarkand. Kabul was the main reference place for early Mughal garden design, and it thus seems fitting that Babur was reburied in Kabul in the Bagh-e Babur garden. Bagh-e Babur has gone through many transformations since that time, most recently in its restoration as an HCP project that serves as a haven for contemporary Afghan society |1|. The second and third Mughal rulers, Humayun and Akbar, also passed through Kabul during precarious periods of their lives.

Early Garden Experimentation

Humayun's garden legacy is one of ephemeral innovation. Although few of his historical gardens survive, Humayun's experiments with garden form, experience and meaning imaginatively broadened the art of garden design for those who followed. He commissioned floating gardens, a zodiac carpet and a circumcision garden party outside Kabul to name a few.[10]

Poor governance led Humayun to spend much of his time in other people's gardens, most notably his brother and archrival Kamran, the site of whose garden survives on an island in the Ravi River in Lahore, where it has been renovated often from Mughal to modern times. While in exile in Shah Tahmasp's Persia, Humayun experienced first-hand a garden legacy that would become linked with that of Mughal India through garden arts, poetry and design.[11]

Monumental Tomb-Gardens and Citadels

Humayun's accidental death shortly after returning to Delhi opened the way for monumental urban gardens and geographic expansion during the reign of his son Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Two major developments stand out, the first of which was the construction of Humayun's Tomb-Garden with its bold scale and layout |4|. There were earlier partial precedents, such as Sikandar Lodi's square tomb-garden in Delhi, but nothing like the scale or design of Humayun's Tomb-Garden. The Garden was commissioned and overseen by Humayun's son Akbar and wife Haji Begum, who brought back scholars from the Hadhramaut who may have resided in the Arab ki Serai near the tomb. Academic debate continues over the respective roles of Akbar and Haji Begum, but the joint patronage of Timur and his noble women provides a possible model.[12] Design of the project has been convincingly attributed to a family of landscape architects from Herat and Bukhara.[13] They were associated with the only surviving Timurid horticultural treatise known as the *Irshad al-Zira'a*, one chapter of which describes the *chahar-bagh* layout of a garden. Scholarly efforts to reconstruct the *chahar-bagh* layout diverge from the conventional square fourfold garden, and from each other.

Humayun's Tomb-Garden thus established a new model for Mughal funerary gardens. It was unique in its integration of the *chahar-bagh* (fourfold) and *hasht bihisht* (eightfold) garden layouts, a synthesis that was repeated in the tomb's architecture and ornamentation. Variations on this design recurred throughout the Mughal Empire, culminating in the Taj Mahal. The last monumental version of this genre occurred at Safdarjung's tomb-garden (1708–54) at the opposite end of Lodhi Road from Humayun's Tomb in Delhi.

Akbar's second major contribution brought Mughal garden design into the cities and citadels of Agra, Fatehpur Sikri and Lahore.[14] Earlier gardens had been temporary encampments at favourable sites. Akbar's urban gardens had strong architectural frames and paved courtyards. They were graced with water features and carved vegetal decoration, as at the Jahangiri Mahal in Agra Fort and the Anup Talao in Fatehpur Sikri |3|. Recent research at Fatehpur Sikri has documented over two dozen garden remnants in a range of settings from central courtyards to suburban plots.[15] Garden-like paved courtyards continued throughout the later history of Mughal architectural and urban design. They may not have been gardens per se, but their features evoked garden forms and aesthetics.[16] On a grander geographical scale Mughal rulers regarded their empire as a garden.[17]

Gardens and Exquisite Naturalism

Akbar's son and successor Jahangir (1569–1627) could not hope to match his father's extraordinary state-building accomplishments over the course of half a century. But, like his father, one of his first projects upon succession was to supervise construction of Akbar's tomb-garden at Sikandra, a fascinating

|5| Virnag garden waterworks in Kashmir.

multi-tiered structure centred within a monumental fourfold garden. Large floral decoration on its gates was unique among Mughal tomb-gardens. Jahangir already had a record of patronage as a prince at projects such as the Hiran Minar's tower, water tank and grave for a favourite antelope near Sheikhupura Fort west of Lahore.

He renewed Babur's passionate and personal autobiographical writing, and his finely attuned naturalism and artistic expression. It was this fascination with nature that attained a highly refined sense of beauty in painting as well as planting.[18] Jahangir constructed at least two great garden design projects in Kashmir at Virnag |5| and Shalimar |6|11|. At Virnag he wrote of the historically sacred spring-fed pool at the top of the garden, set within an octagonal arcade that spilled into a water channel, cascading through garden terraces below. Shalimar Garden was likewise terraced from the shore of Dal Lake up to its mountain water source. It realized the Timurid dream of building gardens flanking a running stream, though Timur never had a prospect as majestic as that overlooking Dal Lake. Jahangir also managed to bring this model down to the plains at a garden near the town of Hasan Abdal, known as Wah (crudely translated as "Wow!").

He was accompanied in these garden design projects by his wife Nur Jahan and her family, who further transformed Mughal garden form and beauty. Nur Jahan's mother was said to have developed the production of rose oil (attar) based on her garden observations.[19] Nur Jahan herself commissioned the first white marble riverfront tomb-garden with polychrome marble inlay in Agra for her parents, known today as Itimad ad-Daula's tomb, which provided a partial precedent for the Taj Mahal. Her brother, Asaf Khan, constructed palace gardens in Lahore as well as the Nishat Bagh in Kashmir that is arguably the most beautiful of all Mughal gardens (see p. 94). Its terraces, water channels and majestic rows of *chenar* (oriental plane) trees provide a grand hillslope vista that sweeps across Dal Lake.

After the death of her husband, defeated in successional struggles, Nur Jahan ended her years supervising construction of the Shahdara tomb-garden complex in Lahore for her husband, brother and herself, whose dimensions were decimally proportioned from the largest garden enclosure of 600 *gaz* (Mughal yards; approximately 490 metres) square to smaller gardens 300 *gaz* square with walks, rooms and water channels that were ten, five and one *gaz* wide respectively.[20]

Garden, City and Empire

Mughal garden history and heritage were established for posterity by a great period of construction during the second quarter of the seventeenth century. Shah Jahan lined the riverfront parapets of Agra and Lahore Forts with jewel-like garden courtyards overlooking the river channels below. Hunting palaces became architecturally refined, as did the famous gardens of Kashmir. Rather than survey the wide proliferation of these projects, it seems apt to focus on two of Shah Jahan's masterpieces.

The Taj Mahal tomb-garden continued the *chahar-bagh* model initiated by Humayun's Tomb, but it diverged from earlier tomb-gardens in several important ways. Its main garden space has a fourfold plan, as does the Taj Ganj village associated with it to the south and the Mahtab Bagh garden to the north. The tomb itself was sited on a high riverfront plinth. Scholars have debated whether this shift in tomb location from garden centre to riverfront had mainly symbolic[21] or visual and functional significance.[22] It now appears that the Mahtab Bagh pleasure garden across the river was part of the original composition that, along with the river's width, centred the tomb within a larger terraced landscape context, once again, "beneath which rivers flow" |7|.[23] Plantings at the Taj Mahal garden were steadily removed in the colonial and independence periods, though there is now greater recognition that historic gardens had more trees and less lawn.[24]

The city of Lahore witnessed construction of its own terraced Shalimar Garden, originally known as the Farah Bakhsh and Faiz Bakhsh gardens, fed by a canal diverted from the Ravi River to Lahore |6|11|. The family of Wazir Khan, who served as governors of the province, built gardens, mosques and *havelis*. Likewise, the Persian noble Ali Mardan Khan built a small canal and garden from a tributary of the Chenab River near Sohdra and was ultimately buried in a large tomb-garden in Lahore not far from that of Dai Anga, who was Shah Jahan's wet nurse. This proliferation of monumental tomb-gardens and forts during

|6| Preceding pages: Shalimar Garden in Lahore, Pakistan.
|7| The Taj Mahal from the Mahtab Bagh garden in Agra, India.

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Shah Jahan's reign constitutes the main surviving buildings of the Mughal Empire.

The largest urban design project of all was the construction of Shahjahanabad as the new capital of Delhi in 1638–48. This new city was fed by a large canal drawn from the Yamuna River. Upon entering Delhi it branched into one channel that ran down the middle of an east-west boulevard known as Chandni Chowk, and a second channel that fed massive gardens to the north of that boulevard built to a large extent by women of the court. In addition to these expansive urban gardens, the citadel was graced by elegant garden courts and water channels that ran north-south, paralleling the River Yamuna below. As with other Mughal citadels, some of these courts were planted while others were paved with exquisitely carved white marble water channels and inlay stonework |8|9|. Wells and Persian wheels served private residential *haveli* gardens within the Walled City.[25]

At least several of Shah Jahan's children and nobles were passionate garden patrons. A water tank and tomb-pavilion built by Dara Shikoh near the beloved spiritual centre of Mian Mir in Lahore is one example. Princess Jahanara is credited with many gardens, from those of Shahjahanabad to the misnamed Zahra Bagh in Agra. As Ebba Koch has shown, Mumtaz Mahal (for whom the Taj Mahal was later constructed) built this garden and subsequently bequeathed it to her daughter Jahanara.[26] Aurangzeb's sons emulated Shah Jahan's Taj Mahal by building the Bibi-ka Maqbara tomb-garden in Aurangabad for their mother.[27]

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Aurangzeb himself was buried in a small grave open to the sky in the corner of a Chishti *pir*'s shrine in Khuldabad, emulating his sister Jahanara at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi.[28]

The Flowering of Late Mughal Gardens

Ordinarily this would be the end of the narrative as Mughal patronage turned in more conservative directions, the state apparatus became overextended, contracted and declined. But that would be a mistake. Grand tomb-gardens continued to be built by nobles such as the late Mughal vizier Safdarjung (1708–54) whose tomb-garden lies on axis with that of Humayun's Tomb, purportedly scavenging its marble from another nearby tomb.

The weakening central state created space for the flourishing of sub-imperial Mughal gardens in less conflict-ridden provinces. Late Mughal gardens were built in cities from Lucknow to Benares.[29] A late eighteenth-century map of Agra riverfront gardens shows hardly a single empty parcel along the Yamuna River.[30] The "twilight of the Mughals," a common phrase among colonial writers, was thus experienced at least in part in beautiful garden settings. Paintings from the reign of Muhammad Shah Rangila (r. 1719–48), for example, depict a colourful range of garden scenes in Delhi including some in the Red Fort. One garden painting shows a strong composition of trees, shrubs and flowerbeds while another presents a delicate tracery of ink and watercolour plantings loosely intermixed and layered upon one another. One painting of the Yamuna riverbank is a forest while another is an open field, another a luscious wetland, and yet another a park-like playground.

The Afterlife of Mughal Gardens

Mughal garden design per se ended with the empire in 1857. The end occurred very near where Mughal garden design began in India three centuries earlier, at Humayun's Tomb-Garden where

|8| Marble water channel in the Red Fort in Shahjahanabad, Delhi, paralleling the Yamuna River.

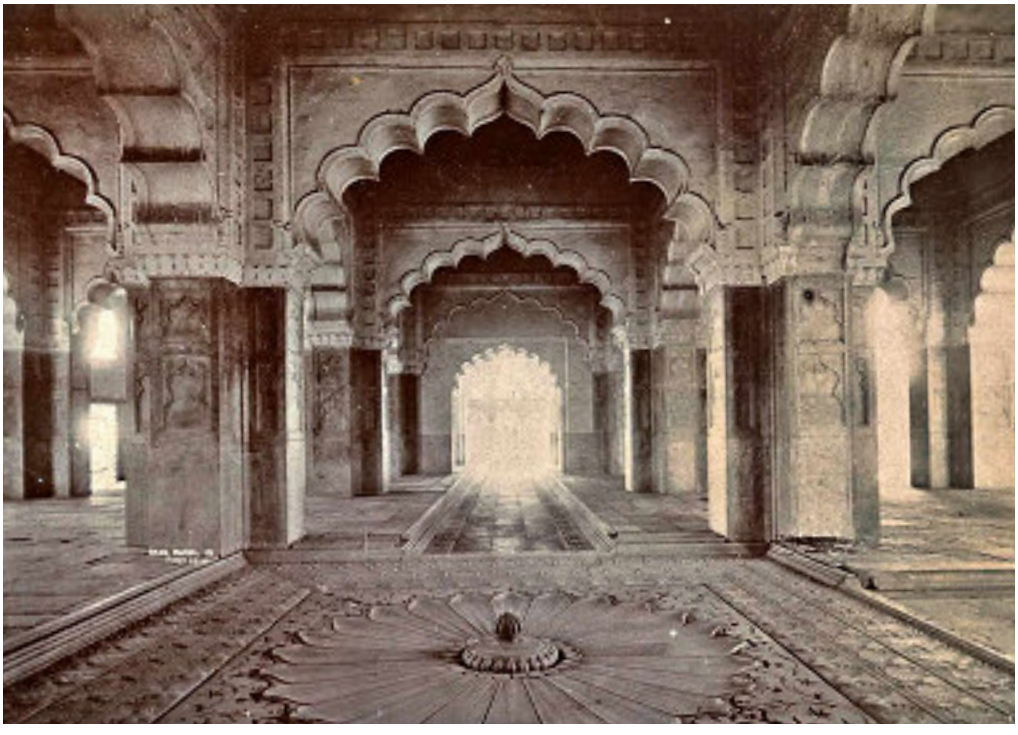
|9| Garden-like marble water pool in the Red Fort in Shahjahanabad, Delhi, India.

the defeated emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, surrendered to William Hodson on 20 September 1857. It was a pitiful end to a declining trend and a horrific conflict. The afterlife of Humayun's Tomb-Garden has had many chapters, the most recent of which was celebrated in 2013 with the completion of its conservation by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).[31]

This brief perspective on Mughal gardens shows that there is no simple beginning to the story. It reaches back into the Central Asian, Persian and Indic histories and the heritage of many peoples, places and times. Mughal garden research has helped stimulate studies of related garden cultures in nearby regions, for example the Sultanate, Rajput and Deccani gardens such as the Qutb Shahi tombs at Hyderabad |10|.[32] These regional histories have broadened our understanding of Central and South Asian garden cultures and raised new questions for research. Nor does there seem to be an end to the story, as designers build upon Mughal garden precedents, consciously and subconsciously, and as diverse societies anticipate the possibility of a paradise at the end of time if not in this world.

These cultural achievements, losses and hopes set within gardens invite deeper reflection on what is being conserved. What do historic gardens mean for contemporary cultures? The foundations for garden conservation in India and most regions of the world are tenuous. Many historical gardens have been abandoned or redeveloped. The afterlife of places like Anarkali's tomb-garden in Lahore, for example, included use as a house for a European mercenary, a Christian church and presently the Punjab provincial archives.[33] Sir John Marshall's otherwise impressive and influential *Conservation Manual* gave limited attention to gardens. The British conserved some Mughal gardens according to their own standards and purposes.[34] They emulated Mughal gardens in the so-called Viceroy's Garden at Rashtrapati Bhawan, as well as exotic garden design, and now community gardens, back in England.

It used to be thought that conservation was a field of applied history and technology. That view is changing. The Historic Cities Programme projects have broken new ground. They pose new questions and challenges for historians and for societies about what these historic gardens were like, how they were originally designed and experienced, what they have meant, and how their conservation demands new types of geographic enquiry and action to address pressing challenges today and for future generations.



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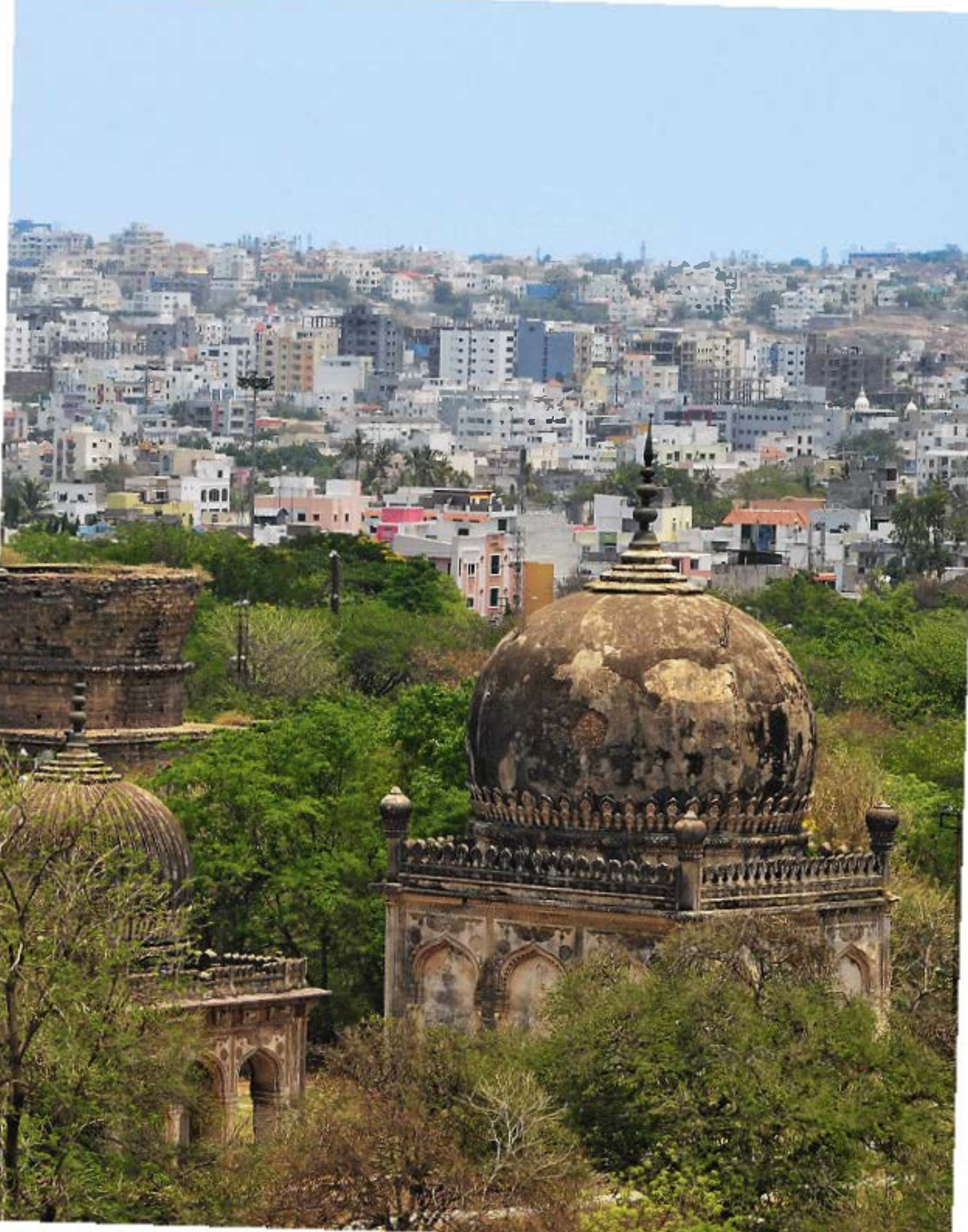

Endnotes

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3 See James L. Wescoat Jr, "Gardens of Conquest and Transformation: Lessons from the Earliest Mughal Gardens in India", in *Landscape Journal*, 10, 2, 1991, pp. 105–114.

4 See Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, Wheeler M. Thackston (trans.), Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1996, pp. 36–37.

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21 See Wayne Begley, "The Garden of the Taj Mahal: A Case Study of Mughal Architectural Planning and Symbolism", in *Mughal Gardens: Sources, Representations, Places, Prospects*, James L. Wescoat Jr. and Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn (eds.), Dumbarton Oaks, Washington, DC, 1996, pp. 213–232.

22 See Koch, "The Mughal Waterfront Garden" op. cit.

23 See Elizabeth B. Moynihan (ed.), *The Moonlight Garden: New Discoveries at the Taj Mahal*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, 2001, pp. 59–77; and James L. Wescoat Jr, "The Colors of Water: Hydrology and Human Experience at the Taj Mahal", in *New Geographies: Urbanisms of Color*, Gareth Doherty (ed.), Harvard Graduate School of Design, Cambridge, MA, 2011, pp. 174–183. The term 'landscape' is a modern heuristic for local historical-geographic complexes in Islamic cultures, see James L. Wescoat Jr, "Between Garden and Geography: Landscape as an Emergent Concept in the Wider Middle East", in *Contemporary Urban Landscapes of the Middle East*, Mohamad Gharipour (ed.), Routledge, London, forthcoming.

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| 10 | Preceding pages: the Qutb Shahi tomb complex, Hyderabad, India.

| 11 | Shalimar Garden, view from the central *takht* to the north gate, Lahore, Pakistan.